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ABSTRACT

Although slave narratives have enjoyed critical attention as literature and autobiography, when presenting them to undergraduates, there is some confusion--usually centering on the dissimilarities between the narratives and traditional autobiography. The narratives are not as linear, not as focused on personal development; the narrators are not as renowned as some national figures. Finally the narratives are polemical or didactic; they argue a point persistently. While the polemical nature of slave narratives must lead to a study of historical context, it should also lead to a study of the popular genres they appropriated. Ex-slaves used the conventions of the spiritual autobiography, the conversion narrative, or the sentimental novel for the following reasons: (1) to tap into a storehouse of formulas which a reading audience already shared; (2) to argue subtextually for their inclusion in the mainstream; (3) to draw the reader into sympathetic relation with themselves before they asserted their sense of difference or individuality through some subversion of expectation. In "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl," for instance, Harriet Jacobs appropriates sentimental conventions at the same time that she challenges them to argue against slavery. (TB)

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SLAVE NARRATIVES AS POLEMIC

Charles J. Heglar

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Although slave narratives have enjoyed critical attention as literature and autobiography, when presenting them to undergraduates, there is some confusion. Usually the confusion centers on the dissimilarities between the narratives and traditional autobiography. The narratives are not as linear, not as focused on personal development, the narrators are not as renowned as some national figures. Finally, the narratives are polemical, or didactic, they argue a point persistently.

In fact, since slave narratives began to receive attention in the late 18th century, commentators have noted their polemical/didactic intentions. One of the purposes of the authenticating prefaces was to tell the audience how to read the narratives, and the suggested reading was always polemical. For example, in his preface to Frederick Douglass's 1845 narrative, William Lloyd Garrison claimed any person who could read Douglass's account without becoming a member of the abolition movement "must have a flinty heart ... .

While the polemical nature of slave narratives must lead to a study of historical context, it should also lead to a study of the popular genres which the narrators appropriated. This appropriation had at least two important purposes. One purpose involved the rhetorical power of tapping into the storehouse of formulas which a large reading audience already shared. Jane Tompkins' comment on the popular novel also applies to other popular forms: "... a novel's impact on the culture at large depends not on its escape from the formulaic and derivative, but on its tapping into a storehouse of commonly held assumptions, reproducing what is already there in a typical familiar form" (xvi).

A second more subversive reason for appropriating popular genres was to subtextually argue to the conventional reader that if black narrators could figure themselves as a central, rather than periphreal part, of the genre, then their exclusion from the popular mainstream was hypocritical; that is, the

society that the genre allegedly reflected had to be changed. Thus, the slave narrators used the genres to draw the reader into a sympathetic relationship through familiar conventions, while moving the same reader to action, rather than complacency, by subverting those conventions and expectations. As William Andrews puts it in To Tell a Free Story, black autobiography "... urges revision of the myths and ideas of America's culture-defining scriptures while it demands new insight of white readers to recognize the ways in which autobiography had become a mode of Afro-American scripture" (14).

As a number of critics have asserted, the movement of a significant number of the narratives is toward individual freedom and literacy for the narrator, while these narrators argue for the liberation of those still enslaved, for whom the narrators serve as representatives. I would suggest that because slave narratives were intended as popular literature, that is, they were meant to influence as large an audience as possible, attention to the popular genres of the day reveals important elements used in structuring the narratives. More importantly, since the narrators wished to maintain control of the shape of their experience, or in William Andrews' phrase move toward "telling a free story," they not only borrowed from popular genres to effectively reach their audience, they also insinuated into those popular genres a sense of difference. Jane Tompkins emphasizes one of the characteristics of popular genres was that for didactic purposes they used characters, situations, and figures as a shorthand. Black authors appropriated this shorthand to argue themselves into the consciousness of the majority audience in terms which that audience was familar with. Furthermore, the genres chosen changed over time as the popularity of forms shifted.

Early slave narratives and black autobiography borrowed conventions from spiritual autobiography and conversion narratives. In this genre, the popular

formulation of the self was as a Christian soul in search of salvation. Autobiographers such as Gustavus Vassa and Richard Allen used this convention to question the integrity of a Christianity which did not practice its own teachings, while they presented their own lives as organized around those teachings. Jarena Lee took their argument one step further. While Vassa and Allen interrogated race as a basis for exclusion, Lee, using the same genre, questioned gender as the basis for her exclusion from the pulpit within Allen's own group of Methodists.

As the United States became a more secular nation in the 19th Century, the conversion genre was de-emphasized in favor of popular democratic rhetoric, which shared romanticism's secular notions of individualism, freedom, and natural rights. Many of what have been called the classic slave narratives of the 1840s shifted to the use of conventions which supported these notions, for instance, a slave who is killed because he will not be beaten, a sense of slavery as theft, and an innate longing for freedom, such as Douglass expressed in his soliloquy on the sail boats. With these conventions, the narrators argued that popular political rhetoric was either a lie built on inequalities, or it could only be made valid by the abolition of slavery.

Like Christianity, the political rhetoric of democracy was slow to persuade the country; in fact, during the 1850s, the Fugitive Slave Law and Dred Scott Decision seemed to integrate slavery within government forms. This impression of ineffectiveness and the popularity of sentimental fiction by Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner and others led some writers to examine sentimentalism as a source of new polemical strategies.

Sentimentalism targeted a female reading audience, especially in terms of their feelings and cultural role as "true women" in the domestic sphere--a sphere that by definition excluded slave women. With the publication of

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl in 1861, Harriet Jacobs found a way to use and subvert sentimental conventions while arguing against slavery. Hazel Carby has shown that Jacobs effectivily exploits and interrogates the sentimental both in terms of its exclusion of black women and its limitations on all women.

Jacobs took the sentimental convention of a pure, pious woman's passive pursuit of marriage and a domestic sphere, and demonstrated, in spite of her lack of a husband and home, that freedom was the central element in woman's quest. If obedience was required of "true women," Jacobs showed that such obedience would only lead to degradation with Dr. Flint. If purity was the crowning glory of "true women," Jacobs showed that the situation of slave women, while inclined toward purity and traditional marriage, demanded a more pragmatic outlook. Furthermore, Jacobs showed that her mistress, who should have been her ally in supporting the ideology of "true womanhood," was one of her worst adversaries.

Her narrative's movement from use to subversion of sentimental conventions increased its rhetorical power. The conventions bridged the gap between middle class readers and a slave woman, a gap that Jacobs feared would lead to condemnation of, rather than sympathy with, her life's story. Finally, Jacobs's skillful manipulation of conventions points out the need for not only historical context but also an historical awareness of popular forms of self-construction in teaching or studying slave narratives.

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